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ABSTRACT

The Texas Education Code requires the Commissioner of Education to develop and propose alternative methods of assessment for students who have not passed the exit level test. The goal of this requirement is an alternative mechanism by which a student can demonstrate the knowledge and skills measured by the exit level test and thus earn a high school diploma. The report proposes changes to the assessment and accountability systems by requesting funding for individualized test administration for all seniors and former students who need this procedure, contracting for a computerized learning development system for remedial instruction, and awarding high school diplomas to students who receive associate degrees from 2-year or junior colleges or who pass the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test. The proposed alternative assessment system also includes various features designed to improve efforts in accelerated instruction so that students will be well prepared for passing the exit level test in high school. An appendix contains descriptions of seven activities in the assessment development. (SLD)

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ED 437 431

A Report to the 75th Texas Legislature

from the Texas Education Agency

Alternative Assessment System for Students Not Passing the Exit Level Tests

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TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

Alternative Assessment System for Students Not Passing the Exit Level Tests

A Report to the
75th Texas Legislature

from the
Texas Education Agency

Submitted to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the House, and the Seventy-Fifth Texas Legislature

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TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

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Mike Moses
Commissioner of Education

December 1, 1996

The Honorable George W. Bush, Governor of Texas
The Honorable Bob Bullock, Lieutenant Governor of Texas
The Honorable Pete Laney, Speaker of the House of Representatives
Members of the 75th Texas Legislature

Section 28.025(d) of the Texas Education Code requires the commissioner of education to develop and propose alternative methods of assessment for students who have not passed the exit level test. The code further states that the goal of this requirement is an alternative mechanism by which a student can demonstrate the knowledge and skills measured by the exit level test and thus earn a high school diploma.

To meet these requirements, this report proposes changes to the assessment and accountability systems by requesting funding for individualized test administration for all seniors and former students who need this procedure, contracting for a computerized learning development system to remediate students, and awarding high school diplomas to eligible students who receive associate degrees or pass the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test. The proposed alternative assessment system also includes various features designed to improve efforts in accelerated instruction so that students will be well prepared for passing the exit level test in high school.

I am pleased to submit this report for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Moses
Commissioner of Education

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Alternative Assessment System for Students Not Passing the Exit Level Tests

This report presents the commissioner's alternative assessment system in compliance with Texas Education Code 28.025(d). This section of the Texas Education Code requires that the commissioner "develop and propose to the legislature alternative methods of assessment for students who have attempted and failed to successfully complete the exit-level assessment instrument administered under Section 39.023(b)." The goal of this requirement is "to produce an alternative mechanism by which a student can demonstrate possession of the knowledge and skills evaluated by the exit-level assessment instrument administered under Section 39.023(b) and gain a high school diploma."

Proposed System

1. **Request funding to ensure that seniors and former students who have not been successful in passing the exit level tests have the option of an individualized administration.**

   These students must have met or be on schedule to meet all other graduation requirements at the time of testing. Individualized testing procedures to be used will be requested for the student by the district and approved by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

2. **Contract for an interactive computerized learning development system consisting of courses that incorporate sustained and intensive remediation in each of the exit level subject areas assessed.**

   The characteristics of this system will include:

   - alignment of these courses with the objectives assessed by the exit level assessment instrument;
   - periodic diagnostic tests administered in modules throughout the courses; these tests would be exempt from public release requirement, TEC Section 39.023(d);
   - stipulation that districts provide access to the system to all students who have attempted but have not passed the exit level assessment.

3. Request the following changes in law:

   - Allow students who receive an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree from a state-credentialed or state-certified two-year or junior college to receive a high school diploma if they have successfully completed post-secondary courses that require the skills assessed by the exit level tests they have not yet passed. TEA will establish an internal credential review procedure, including a determination based on transcript and course description review that the student has taken and passed post-secondary courses that require the reading, writing, and mathematics knowledge and skills assessed by the exit level tests. The student will request the diploma from the high school from which he/she completed all other graduation requirements.

- Allow students who pass the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test and who have met all other graduation requirements to receive a high school diploma.

4. Provide individual item analysis reports as a standard report for:

   - all exit level students who have failed to successfully complete the exit level assessment;
   - any grade 8 student who scores below a TLI of 75 on the TAAS mathematics or reading tests or below a scale score of 1540 on the writing test.

   These reports should be accompanied by an interpretive brochure explaining proper use of the data presented in the report.

5. Continue to require that the cumulative exit level passing rate for districts be reported in the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS).

6. Provide written notification to the parent/guardian of each grade 8 student who receives TAAS scores below a specified threshold.

   The notification should indicate the student's score and the fact that the current level of performance suggests that without sufficient instruction he/she is unlikely to meet minimum expectations on the exit level test(s) when administered. The letter would serve as an official notice that the student requires some sustained accelerated instruction in order to pass the exit level test(s). Additionally, the campus will be required to develop a plan with the parents or guardians to address the student's areas of instructional need.

7. Require that remediation plans for students scoring below an empirically determined minimum score on TAAS be reported as part of campus improvement plans.

8. Contract for a professional development system to assist district and campus staff with the review, selection, and use of instructional materials in remediation programs or other instructional activities designed to assist students to pass the exit level or end-of-course tests.

Alternative Assessment System for Students Not Passing the Exit Level Tests

CHAPTER 1 Background and Context

The purpose of this document is to present the commissioner's alternative assessment system for exit level and former students who have not yet passed one or more of the exit level tests. The goal of this system is to propose alternative procedures and methods of assessment that will continue to ensure that all Texas students are held to high standards of learning. Procedures, mechanisms, or adaptations have been identified that will permit students who, in fact, have attained the requisite knowledge and skills to demonstrate these competencies and gain a high school diploma.

This chapter provides an overview of the context within which the system was developed. Chapter 2 presents components of the alternative assessment system and the rationale for offering them. Finally, the appendix outlines the activities conducted under contract by Westat, Inc. as a part of this project.

Testing Requirement

The exit level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was first administered in the fall of 1990 in the subject areas of mathematics, writing, and reading. Section 39.025 of the Texas Education Code states:

a) A student may not receive a high school diploma until the student has performed satisfactorily on the secondary exit level assessment instruments for English language arts and mathematics administered under Section 39.023(b).

b) Each time a secondary exit level assessment instrument is administered, a student who has not been given a high school diploma because of a failure to perform satisfactorily on the assessment instrument for that subject area may retake the assessment instrument.

c) A student who has been denied a high school diploma under Subsection (a) and (b) and who subsequently performs satisfactorily on each secondary exit level assessment shall be issued a high school diploma.

Section 101.2(b) of the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) states that all nonexempt students must demonstrate satisfactory performance on either the TAAS exit level or end-of-course tests in order to receive a high school diploma. (The end-of-course graduation path will be available to students once all of these end-of-course tests are fully implemented.)

The Texas Administrative Code also permits test accommodations on the TAAS unless the accommodation would make a particular test invalid. TAC Section 101.3 indicates that test accommodations should be determined by the needs of the student and the accommodations the student routinely receives in classroom instruction.

The Legislative Charge

Concerns have been raised about the impact of the exit level test on students who fail to achieve the passing standard, but in terms of other indicators (courses taken, grades received, etc.) appear to have performed satisfactorily during their K-12 experience.

Concerns have been raised about the impact of the exit level test on students who fail to achieve the passing standard, but who, in terms of other indicators (courses taken, grades received, etc.), appear to have performed satisfactorily during their K-12 experience. In response to these concerns, the Texas Education Code requires that the commissioner of education develop alternative methods of assessment for students who have tried but failed to pass the exit level tests. The Texas Education Code Section 28.025(d) reads as follows:

> Not later than December 1, 1996, the commissioner shall develop and propose to the legislature alternative methods of assessment for students who have attempted and failed to successfully complete the exit-level assessment instrument administered under Section 39.023(b). The goal of this requirement is to produce an alternative mechanism by which a student can demonstrate possession of the knowledge and skills evaluated by the exit-level assessment administered under Section 39.023(b) and gain a high school diploma.

Three key ideas have framed the development of the alternative assessment system presented in this report.

First, the current assessment and accountability systems and other components of the educational system provide the boundaries within which change can occur. In particular, TAAS, the end-of-course examinations, the state accountability system, and the essential elements provide a context for the proposed options.

Second, the educational system is complex and its components highly interrelated. Adjustments in any one part of the system can lead to modifications in others. Throughout the development of this alternative assessment system, the intended and unintended consequences of the proposed changes have been carefully examined.

Third, the proposed mechanisms and procedures maintain the high standards established for a high school diploma. This aspect of the proposal is required by law and is supported by educators, policymakers, and other citizens who provided input during the development of this system.

The Assessment and Accountability Systems

The principal goal of the student assessment program is to measure the progress of students toward achieving academic excellence with the main purpose being institutional accountability.

The Student Assessment Program. The principal goal of the student assessment program is to measure the progress of students toward achieving academic excellence with the main purpose being institutional accountability. The TAAS, a criterion-referenced testing program mandated by the Texas Legislature in 1989, is a key component of the student assessment program. TAAS provides a comprehensive assessment of the essential elements, and higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving ability are emphasized.

The Texas Accountability System. The accountability system measures the quality of learning in Texas schools using a set of academic excellence indicators. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) provides information on school and district staff, finances, programs, and student demographics in addition to test results and other performance indicators. These data are used to develop reports for campuses, districts, regions, and the state as a whole. District and school accreditation ratings are based on the AEIS data and the accompanying standards. Students must pass the exit level TAAS or end-of-course examinations to receive a high school diploma. An exempt special education student who successfully completes the requirements of his or her individual education plan (IEP) will receive a high school diploma.

Three base indicators are used to determine accountability ratings for districts and campuses. These are TAAS results in reading and mathematics at Grades 3-8 and 10 and writing at Grades 4, 8, and 10; the dropout rate (for high schools); and the attendance rate.

Three base indicators are used to determine accountability ratings for districts and campuses. These are TAAS results in reading and mathematics at Grades 3-8 and 10 and writing at Grades 4, 8, and 10; the dropout rate (for high schools); and the attendance rate. Districts and campuses may receive recognition based on additional indicators which represent performance beyond minimum requirements. Based on the standards met, districts are rated as exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, or academically unacceptable. Depending on the standards met, campuses may receive the following ratings: exemplary, recognized, acceptable, or low-performing.

Several sets of reports based on the AEIS data are developed annually. AEIS reports are developed that describe the performance of districts and campuses on the base accountability indicators as well as additional accountability indicators and provide district/school profile information. In addition, a school report card is provided annually to each school and must be provided to the family of each student. The report cards include information on the base accountability indicators, exemption data, performance on college admissions examinations, participation in end-of-course examinations, completion of the State Board of Education's Recommended High School Program, TAAS/TASP equivalency, student/teacher ratios, and administrative and instructional costs per student.

Student Performance on the Exit Level Tests

Students begin taking the exit level TAAS tests in the spring of their sophomore year and currently have up to eight opportunities to take the test before graduation at the end of their senior year. For the approximately 210,000 grade 10 students who began testing in March 1996 (the Class of 1998), 81% passed reading, 85% passed writing, 65% passed mathematics, and 60% passed all tests taken.

It is possible to estimate the cumulative passing rate for a given class of seniors by examining the results of the TAAS administration held immediately prior to senior graduation. For the Class of 1996, for example, in the TAAS administration held in May 1996, approximately 13,000 grade 12 students tested and about 3,500 passed, leaving 9,500 seniors who did not pass one or more exit level tests.

In addition, at the first administration of each school year, approximately 37,000 Grade 12 students and about 2,500 former students are taking the TAAS tests. Thus, the number of students who might be eligible for the alternative assessment system each school year is estimated to be between 10,000 and 40,000 students.

CHAPTER 2

Alternative Assessment System for Students Not Passing the Exit Level Tests

Key Features of the System

1. **Request funding to ensure that seniors and former students who have not been successful in passing the exit level tests have the option of an individualized administration.**

   These students must have met or be on schedule to meet all other graduation requirements at the time of testing. Individualized testing procedures to be used will be requested for the student by the district and approved by TEA.

The use of individualized test procedures may help lessen performance anxiety and alleviate the pressure some students feel and may enable these students to demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge and skills assessed by the exit level tests. While many individualized testing procedures are not precluded under current policy, these types of procedures often require additional resources (e.g., additional test administrators, separate testing locations, special test equipment, etc.). With appropriate funding, campuses and districts will be better able to implement individualized test administration procedures that may permit students who have failed to perform successfully on the exit level tests to demonstrate proficiency on the knowledge and skills assessed by these tests.

The following general parameters are offered as a basis for discussion:

Candidates: (a) Students must be seniors or former students who have met or are meeting all graduation requirements (coursework, grades, and attendance); (b) students must have attempted the TAAS exit level tests at least once; (c) students must have received passing grades in all required high school level courses in the content

area(s) in which the individualized administration is requested; and (d) the school district must make the request to TEA in the name of the student.

Testing Procedures: Trained personnel in the student's high school should work individually with the student and/or the student's parent(s) to explore the type of administration procedures that, in their best judgment, would permit the student to demonstrate proficiency on the knowledge and skills assessed by the TAAS tests. Such procedures might include using a computer to complete the TAAS written composition, allowing the student to record the passages into a tape recorder and then to play them back as he or she works, testing in an individualized room with student-selected background music. TEA will develop a list of frequently requested testing arrangements and general guidelines for schools and students to use in developing their request for individualized testing.

Education Service Center (ESC) Test Administrators: The agency will train one or more appropriate staff members from each ESC on individualized test administration and monitoring procedures. ESC staff in turn will train locally selected professional staff members in the specific procedures to be used in the district-level administration of individualized testing.

General Procedures: (a) The district will request the individualized testing at least 45 working days prior to the regularly scheduled TAAS administration date; (b) within 15 working days of receipt of the request, TEA will either approve or disapprove the administration procedures and so inform the district; (c) district staff will consult with their ESC concerning specific procedures to be followed; (d) the administration will take place on the same day(s) as the regularly scheduled TAAS test(s); (e) testing will occur in the student's school unless other arrangements are mutually agreeable; (f) the test administrator will follow the approved procedures.

Monitoring: (a) Test administrators will complete an evaluation form following each testing session. This form will provide information concerning the procedure used, its perceived value, and problems or related concerns; (b) each student's answer sheet will be coded to indicate that an individualized administration was used; and (c) TEA will routinely analyze results of all such administrations, including a tracking of the score change between the previous TAAS administrations and the individualized administrations.

Logistics: (a) The student's transcript will not indicate that the test was passed under special circumstances; (b) students may request one individualized administration of each content area test per semester for a maximum of three such administrations; (c) this option is also available to former students who have met all other graduation requirements except for passing the exit level tests; and (d) individualized tests will be scored and reported in the same manner and in the same time frame as are other exit level tests.

Costs: TEA will make a legislative request for funds to reimburse districts for the incremental costs of administering these individualized tests. Districts will be reimbursed for test administration costs not to exceed $300 per student ($100 per subject test administered).

This procedure is consistent with the legislative charge to propose alternative methods of assessment while still maintaining the structure, substance, standard, and validity of the current TAAS. Students receiving individualized administrations will still have to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the essential elements. The procedures developed by TEA to review and approve or reject individual requests must ensure maintenance of the validity of the exit level TAAS. The proposed procedure, while maintaining the standard and validity of TAAS, permits students and their family and school advocates to request procedures they believe will best permit the students to demonstrate their possession of the knowledge and skills evaluated by TAAS.

2. **Contract for an interactive computerized learning development system consisting of courses that incorporate sustained and intensive remediation in each of the exit level subject areas assessed.**

   The characteristics of this system will include:

   - alignment of these courses with the objectives assessed by the exit level assessment instrument;
   - periodic diagnostic tests administered in modules throughout the courses; these tests would be exempt from public release requirement, TEC Section 39.023(d);
   - stipulation that districts provide access to the system to all students who have attempted but did not pass the exit level assessment.

Remedial courses are inadequate—providing instruction that is boring and overdue.

Local and regional stakeholder attendee

If students who are otherwise succeeding in their course work are offered an effective, engaging system of instruction specifically tailored to the essential elements assessed by TAAS, and if they attend seriously and perform well throughout such a focused instructional program, they will likely be able to pass subsequent administrations of the TAAS tests. The intent is to give every student an equal opportunity to be exposed to high-quality remedial instruction, regardless of the instructional program they received prior to this time.

Proposed Changes in the Way Students May Demonstrate the Knowledge and Skills Evaluated by the Exit Level Tests

Current Practice. Section 101.2(b) of the Texas Administrative Code states that all nonexempt students must demonstrate satisfactory performance on either the exit level or end-of-course tests in order to receive a high school diploma. The end-of-course graduation path will be available to students once all of these end-of-course tests are fully implemented.

3. **Request the following changes in law:**

    - Allow students who receive an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree from a state-credentialed or state-certified two-year or junior college to receive a high school diploma if they have successfully completed post-secondary courses that require the skills assessed by the exit level test they have not yet passed. TEA will establish an internal credential review procedure, including a determination based on transcript and course description review that the student has taken and passed post-secondary courses that require the reading, writing, and mathematics knowledge and skills assessed by the exit level tests. The students will request the diploma from the high school from which they completed all other graduation requirements.

This change would permit students who attend and graduate from junior college but have not passed the exit level tests to obtain their high school diplomas. Logistics on the petition process, required paperwork, review procedures, and diploma-issuing processes will need to be developed. This

option would also require a change in state law regarding the granting of a diploma.

- Allow students who pass the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test and who have met all other graduation requirements to receive a high school diploma.

The TASP is required of students in Texas public colleges and universities. It contains tests in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing. Students who pass TASP in a content area that they have not passed in TAAS are demonstrating competence in that area and should be granted their high school diplomas. TEA will need to develop monitoring, reviewing, and diploma-granting procedures for this option.

The latter two changes may not affect a large number of students, but they are important options. They permit students who for whatever reasons were unable to pass TAAS during their high school years to be recognized for their perseverance and later accomplishments.

While the legislative charge outlined in Section 28.025(d) calls for the development of alternative methods of assessment, in order to reach the goal of this requirement it is important to consider changes in, and enhancements to, *other* parts of the student assessment and accountability systems that may either directly or indirectly enable students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills evaluated by the exit level tests. Various stakeholders, for example, indicated that the way the tests are administered prevents some students from demonstrating what they know and are able to do. Others suggested that changes in the reporting of test results might help to focus local remediation efforts, perhaps ultimately enabling more students to meet minimum expectations on the current exit level tests. Therefore, the following additional proposed changes are offered.

Proposed Changes in the Way the Exit Level Tests Are Administered

Current Practice. A number of accommodations and modifications that do not cause test results to be invalid may be used during test administration.

A list of the most common accommodations appears in the TAAS district and campus test coordinator manual. The decision to use a particular modification with a student is made locally on an individual basis and should take into consideration the needs of the students and whether the student routinely receives the modification during classroom instruction.

- Implement procedures to distribute more widely the list of test accommodations in advance of exit level test administrations.

Various stakeholders--students, parents, teachers, and administrators--indicated that information about the testing accommodations is poorly understood or often not widely disseminated at the local level. This proposed procedure involves ensuring that all teachers and interested persons are informed. Its purpose is twofold: (1) reminding TAAS coordinators of the importance of making students, their families, and their teachers aware of allowable TAAS accommodations, and (2) proactively assisting TAAS coordinators in the use of these accommodations.

A variety of accommodations already exist, but many people are unaware of them.

State panelist

This procedure might take the form of a single mailing to each TAAS coordinator. The mailing would include a sample letter to teachers and another letter to students (or the students' parents/guardians) informing each of the allowable accommodations. The draft letter would be accompanied by the appropriate pages from the TAAS district and campus test coordinator manual. TAAS coordinators would be urged to send the letter and related information to teachers and/or families of students who had previously not passed the exit level tests.

Proposed Changes in the Way TAAS Results are Reported

Current Practice. Two types of reports are provided for each TAAS and end-of-course test administration: standard and optional. Standard reports are provided automatically to districts. For a nominal fee, districts may order optional reports which present student performance data in additional formats or in greater detail.

The *Item Analysis Summary Report* and order forms for individual student item analysis reports accompany the released tests provided to districts at the end of the summer following each school year. By showing students' responses and the correct answers for each item on the test, the information provided in the individual item analysis report is valuable for teachers in planning instruction both for individual students and for groups of students.

- TEA should provide individual item analysis reports as a standard report for all exit level students who have failed to successfully complete the exit level assessment and for any grade 8 student who scores below a TLI of 75 on the mathematics or reading tests or below a scale score of 1540 on the writing test. These reports should be accompanied by an interpretive brochure explaining proper use of the data presented in the report.

Making these reports standard and routinely providing them will help in the efforts to prepare students to complete their high school graduation requirements.

What if there were a face-to-face notification of parents that this 8th grade student did not pass TAAS and is not likely to pass in grade 10, or to obtain a diploma, if things don't change?
Forum participant

- Provide written notification to the parent/guardian of each grade 8 student who receives TAAS scores below a specified threshold. The notification should indicate the student's score and the fact that the current level of performance suggests that without sufficient instruction he/she is unlikely to meet minimum expectations on the exit level test(s). The letter would serve as an official notice that the student requires some sustained accelerated instruction in order to pass the exit level test(s). Additionally, the campus will be required to develop a plan with the parents or guardians to address the student's areas of instructional need.

Performance on the grade 8 TAAS is a good predictor of exit level performance. The fact that the primary interpretive score for TAAS--the TLI--was designed specifically for this purpose makes this warning procedure very valuable. In fact, a TLI below 70 at any grade indicates the likelihood (without special intervention) of a failing score at exit level.

A process will be developed for implementing this procedure. The intent of this procedure is to take advantage of the high predictability of TAAS administered at an earlier grade for exit level performance by highlighting the scores at a stage when remediation can still take place prior to administration of the exit level tests. This procedure also should eventually be expanded to include lower grades so that the accelerated

instruction for low-achieving students begin as early as possible. Waiting until grade 11 to begin sustained remediation for students who, several years earlier, seemed likely to fail the exit level test delays the remediation period unwisely and unnecessarily. The requirement that the campus develop with the parents or guardians a plan to address instructional needs will also help prepare students to succeed on the exit level test and qualify for a high school diploma.

A threshold value will be determined, below which these warning notifications should be sent and the instructional plan developed. This threshold value should be at or slightly above a TLI of 70 in reading and mathematics and a score of 1500 on the writing test, which are the minimum passing standards.

- Require that remediation plans for students scoring below some empirically determined minimum score on TAAS be reported as part of campus improvement plans.

Many stakeholders urged that district remediation plans for low-performing students become a more integral component of the accountability system.

Some urged that these remediation plans be group-based, that is, focused on overall campus remediation activities. Others urged that formal remediation plans be developed for every student who scores below a certain TAAS threshold TLI. Developing individualized remediation plans, if not currently done, will require additional effort at the campus and district level.

Changes in the Way the Exit Level Tests Are Used in the Accountability System

Current Practice. With regard to exit level performance, the accountability rating system currently uses the scores of grade 10 students who are tested in the spring administration. A recent addition to AEIS, the cumulative exit level passing rate for districts, broadens the measures of exit level student performance.

- Continue to require the cumulative exit level passing rate for districts be reported in AEIS.

Various stakeholders indicated that this measure provides greater incentives for schools to intensify remediation efforts for students who have failed to pass one or more of the exit

level tests. This practice also provides data about districts that are successful in their remediation efforts with exit level students and conveys the importance of continuing to remediate students so they will pass all portions of the exit level tests before their class graduates.

Proposed Changes in Other Areas of the Educational System

- Contract for a professional development system to assist district and campus staff with the review, selection, and use of instructional materials in remediation programs or other instructional activities designed to assist students to pass the exit level or end-of-course tests.

Professional development is key. Teachers need help in providing adequate remediation.

Forum participant

This suggested change primarily addresses the *instruction*, rather than the assessment, of students who are experiencing difficulty passing the exit level tests. Throughout the information-gathering activities for this project, almost all stakeholder input has focused more on instructional concerns than on testing issues. Problems that many students have in passing the TAAS exit level tests appear to be based on their insufficient level of attainment of the assessed knowledge and skills rather than problems inherent in test content, format, or administration procedures. Therefore, the remediation efforts devoted to those who have failed to pass the exit level tests should be improved.

Appendix Project Activities and Procedures

Responding to the legislative charge for this project in a comprehensive way involved collecting the views and perspectives from a broad array of audiences and stakeholders. Throughout this project, Westat, Inc. attempted to collect reactions and views from the following groups:

The Public

- students
- legislators
- school board members
- parents
- taxpayers in general
- associations of business and other public audiences

The Education Profession

- teachers
- administrators
- curriculum and program experts
- assessment specialists
- university representatives
- professional educational associations
- various agency staff

The outline of activities below indicates how the views of these various audiences were heard and considered throughout the project. Westat found excellent cooperation and willingness to share perspectives and views. We express our thanks to the various districts and campuses we visited, and we are deeply appreciative to the many students, parents, teachers, and other professional staff members who so willingly shared their time, views, and experiences.

The decision was made to solicit as broad a set of views as possible within the constraints of time and resources for the project. Obviously, when the views of groups with diverse interests, backgrounds, and perspectives are taken into account, there is rarely consensus among the various views, let alone unanimity. Nevertheless, the goal was to collect the diverse views, sift through the expressed perspectives, and seek areas of convergence.

In order to collect the opinions of the various stakeholders of concern, eight discrete but interrelated activities were conducted by Westat as shown below and summarized in this chapter.

Activity/Audience	Date(s)	Meeting location
1. Visits with local and regional stakeholders	April 22-May 23	various Texas locations
2. Statewide forum on exit level issues	June 18	Austin
3. Meeting with selected state assessment directors	June 24	Phoenix
4. Collect responses to statewide requests for written comment	May-July	
5. Interviews with state level associations, legislators, and agency staff	July 15-16	Austin
6. Review of practices in the field	June-August	
7. National and state advisory panel meeting	August 22	Austin
8. Development and review of preliminary recommendations	October	

As this table and the descriptions that follow will indicate, all of the groups whose views were sought were included in one or, more typically, several of the unique activities. In addition, the goal was to collect personal face-to-face reactions as well as broader, yet less personal reactions.

Activity 1: Visits with Local and Regional Stakeholders

Interviews and discussions were held in seven demographically diverse Texas school districts in spring 1996 to gain insights into why some students repeatedly fail the TAAS exit level tests and to discuss some possible alternative mechanisms that might be developed for use in these situations. The interviews were conducted by Westat staff and observed by several TEA members. When possible, local assessment coordinators also attended. Interviews were conducted with students (both in-school and out-of-school), parents, and school officials (counselors, teachers, and administrators).

The discussions centered around two general topics: current issues with the testing system and ways to address these issues.

Many issues were identified, but the following were mentioned most frequently:

- the need to improve the remediation courses offered to students who are in danger of failing or who fail the exit exams;
- inability to interpret test results reported to students;
- length of test, interest level of test.

Several test administration and scoring changes were suggested that the stakeholders believed would help students pass the TAAS tests after repeated attempts:

- develop a modular version of the TAAS mathematics test so that previously passed sections would not have to be taken again, and students would have to demonstrate mastery of an objective on the mathematics test only once;
- base passing the TAAS on a cumulative score from the three tests;
- permit oral reading and testing for the reading portion of the TAAS;
- allow the use of calculators on the TAAS mathematics test;
- develop computer-based versions of the TAAS.

The following alternatives to the exit level assessment were also suggested:

- allowing workplace certifications;
- judging portfolios;
- making special accommodations for students who are weak in skills but are not classified as special education students.

A final suggestion that did not address TAAS instruction or the test was the concept of a multi-tier diploma. The first-tier diploma would indicate that the student has met all graduation requirements but did not pass the TAAS. The second-tier diploma would show that the student met all graduation requirements and passed ali of the TAAS tests. The third-tier diploma would indicate that a student has passed TAAS at an exemplary level of achievement and has met various stringent coursework requirements.

Activity 2: Statewide Forum on Exit Level Issues

A forum was held in Austin on June 18, 1996, to discuss and recommend options for alternative assessment methods for students unable to pass the exit level tests. The recommended options shared with forum participants were designed to maintain the exit level standards but were to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the required skills in an alternative way. Participants at the meeting included various TEA staff members and approximately 35 invited stakeholders from across the state. Westat staff prepared a set of critical issues to discuss. The issues and a summary of participant responses follow.

Critical issue 1. What exactly is the scope of the problem? To what extent is the failure to graduate solely or primarily a function of failing to pass the exit level exam?

To understand the scope of their problem, participants considered the May 1995 TAAS exit level test scores. TEA representatives indicated that approximately one-half of these students who still have not passed the exit level test by the end of grade 12 did not graduate for reasons not associated with the TAAS (i.e., poor attendance and unsuccessful completion of required coursework). Students not identified as special education, but who need extra services, and new immigrants with poor attendance records account for part of the failure rate. Several participants proposed setting up support services for students unable to pass the test.

Critical issue 2. What are some alternatives to the current TAAS that might be used in place of the exit level exam?

To address this issue, participants focused on the fact that a high percent of the students taking the exit level test have limited English proficiency. Providing accommodation for these students, such as translating the test, would enable some students who are fluent in their native language to pass the exit test. Others might be assisted merely by having written prompts in their native languages. This alternative would potentially require translating the exit test into the 80-90 different languages spoken in Texas. Annual development time, costs, and language expertise needed to develop and approve high-quality translations may pose obstacles to feasibility.

Critical issue 3. What are some alternatives to the TAAS that might be used to assess the competencies required for high school graduation? Can they be used reliably and consistently? How should standards be developed for establishing equivalent performance between TAAS and other currently available tests?

Participants suggested six alternatives, with the understanding that a thorough pretesting of any assessment must be accomplished before it is implemented. The suggestions ranged from using old tests to new technology.

1. The use of the GED as part of an assessment test was suggested, but this was not viewed as viable since the GED sponsor does not want to be involved with issuing state diplomas.
2. The development of a computer-based TAAS was suggested as a method of changing format and routine. It was also discussed as a means of diminishing test anxiety, if anxiety is a major aspect of failure.

3. The development of a modular approach to assessment received some participant support. With this approach, students would only retake the parts of tests they had not previously passed. Questions regarding the reliability of short subtests, validity of such assessment, and the cost implications of time and test development made this idea controversial.

4. Another suggestion was to use a performance measure or a portfolio. With this approach, a district panel would review a student's work to determine his/her qualifications.

5. Still another suggestion was to use an alternate set of data (perhaps grades, expert judgment, or other test results) for students who missed passing by a small margin.

6. Recommendations not directly rated to test administration procedures or the test itself were also made. These included issuing an alternative diploma for students unable to pass the exit level tests, providing focused instruction to students before the exit testing begins, determining an intensive intervention for students who do not pass the 8th grade test, and focusing more attention on parental notification when a student is in danger of failure.

Critical issue 4. If an alternative system is put in place, what should the criteria be for participation in this system?

If a new system is available, eligibility guidelines must be in place. Criteria to consider might be number of failures, specific characteristics of students who are failing, and characteristics of students who are failing the instructional program in which the student has been participating. However, nearly all participants felt that even if some type of alternative system or procedure or instrument could be put in place, it is unlikely that many additional students would pass and receive a diploma. In their view, most students who weren't passing the test did not possess the necessary skills.

Critical issue 5. What should be the role of the local school district in administering an alternative assessment system?

The issues to be examined included defining the roles of the state and individual districts, deciding how much standardization would be needed across districts, assigning the responsibility for developing the guidelines, and addressing the time and financial concerns involved with developing an alternative assessment system.

Most participants felt that the large majority of students who are unable to pass the exit tests lack the skills necessary to receive a diploma. The students who fall into this category are immigrants who are new to this country, those with excessive school absences, and students who have significant learning problems, impairments, and disabilities that are not severe enough to qualify them for special education services or exemptions. Many participants perceived that developing an alternative assessment for the small number of students who might benefit from it might be prohibitive in terms of cost and time.

Activity 3: Meeting with Selected State Assessment Directors

A meeting was held in Phoenix, Arizona on June 24, 1996, to discuss how other states address the issue of alternative assessment system for students who are unable to pass their graduation or exit tests without changing expected standards of excellence. The meeting was attended by some state representatives, who were invited to the meeting to discuss the alternative assessment system strategies used in their state. Representatives from 8 states attended the meeting, along with representatives of TEA, Westat, and members of our national advisory panel for the project.

Although this meeting considered alternative assessment systems for LEP, special education and exit level tests, this summary deals only with the issues discussed concerning the exit level tests.

Pat De Vito (Rhode Island) characterized the policies within his state and reported that the Rhode Island school system has no alternative assessment system, but does have 45 accommodations available to all students. The main issue in this state is not whether all students are tested, but rather for which students the data are reported.

Roger Trent (Ohio) shared information regarding his state's strategy on alternatives/assessments for exit level tests. Their proposed system included projects, portfolios, and a variety of other alternatives including criteria for their application. The ideas were sent to all of Ohio's 611 districts for approval, and most rejected the idea of alternative assessment system altogether. The only current "alternative" system in place is for LEP students with a C+ average in the subject area to be tested who do not pass the exit level test. These students can take a combination oral/visual administration of the same math and citizenship tests in the students' native language. For students who cannot pass the exit level test, Ohio delays instead of denies the diploma.

Bud Hall (New Mexico) explained that the State Department of Education requires requests on a student-by-student basis for those needing exemptions from the system and the reasons for those exemptions. An alternative assessment is permitted for seniors who want to graduate, but the assessment office works with the school to determine which assessment procedure is most appropriate. He also reported that the state's exit test has been translated into Spanish, but the translated version has not been widely utilized.

Claudia Davis (Louisiana) reported that there are no data available on exemptions, but there are a variety of accommodations permitted on the exit test.

Ellie Sanford mentioned that North Carolina has a high-stakes exit test that is taken by 95 percent of all students. Their curriculum is state-mandated, and the assessments are aligned with that curriculum. The only alternative in North Carolina is that students can receive a certificate of attendance if they do not pass the exit test.

Linda Hansche reported that Georgia is phasing in a new high-stakes program, and that to date there has been a greater concern for the content of the textbooks than for the instructional/assessment program.

Lance Hodes from Westat mentioned that there had been very little discussion regarding the time and money these changes to the system may take. Roger Trent's response was that the districts may have rejected Ohio's proposed set of alternative procedures at least in part because of concern that the state would not provide resources for these new procedures.

Mike Beck from Westat mentioned that New Jersey has the only fully developed system of alternative assessment for exit tests. The costs, which are said to be high, are the responsibility of the districts. Mr. Beck asked the group if other states are under the same pressure as Texas to provide alternative assessment system to the exit tests, and the responses were mixed.

Texas is not the only state currently attempting to develop strategies, procedures, or alternative assessment systems for students unable to pass the exit tests. Other states are also trying to decide upon assessments that are acceptable to their departments of education and to the community at large. The information gathered was significant in that it uncovered other concerns that need to be addressed if new procedures are to be incorporated in the assessment systems. Unanswered questions include issues such as who will pay for the new procedures and how much time is needed to develop and incorporate new procedures into the districts. Other questions raised from these discussions concerned the states' quality of instruction and the content of the curriculum. Everyone agreed that there are no easy answers to these questions, and that there are many needs that have to be met.

Activity 4: Summary Of Written Input From Texas Stakeholders

The commissioner of education sent a letter to all superintendents in the state asking for input on the eight questions listed below. Responses could be faxed, E-mailed, or mailed to Westat. Responses related to the exit level tests were received from only three school districts. The questions and responses are summarized below.

1. **Alternative administration procedures or other adaptations of the current TAAS test**

   All three respondents agreed that some kind of exit level tests were necessary for high school graduation. One said to use the current standards: if students cannot pass, they have not reached the standards necessary to graduate. Another respondent agreed that the TAAS or a similar test of basic skills should be used. He was, however, concerned about students in remedial classes who do not qualify for exempt status. He stated, "they fail the exit level test because their innate abilities will not allow them to attain the skills necessary to pass the TAAS."

2. **Alternative assessment methods or instruments to assess the competencies required for high school graduation**

   One respondent believed the TAAS was the standard and had no comments on alternative assessment methods. Another respondent believed a test based on the level of competency of students could be an option along with teacher-created tests approved by TEA. A teacher thought a test to determine how best to help students so they can be gainfully employed after high school would be a useful tool for assessing their competencies.

3. **Alternative assessment methods that could be used reliably and consistently as appropriate measures for exiting high school**

   Respondents either answered "no suggestions," or provided no response.

4. **Appropriateness of establishing equivalent performances on other currently available tests**

   Only one respondent answered this question. He said, "This could be done for those who continue to fail TAAS."

5. **The feasibility of alternative assessment approaches, such as those that may help those with test anxiety**

   The only specific response to the feasibility issue was, "How would you make the test comparable to the content of the TAAS exit level test?"

6. **Eligibility requirements for participation in an alternative assessment system**

   There were three responses for this question. One respondent felt that students who have failed to pass the TAAS twice should be eligible for an alternative test. Another respondent said that the local district along with TEA should devise eligibility requirements for an alternative assessment system. A third believed that students who are weak academically but who do not qualify for special education may qualify for the alternative test.

7. **Role of the local district in administering an alternative assessment system**

   Two respondents stated that the local school districts should be responsible for administering an alternative assessment system.

8. **Amount of instruction in English before requiring testing with the English TAAS**

   The only respondent believed 5 years of instruction in English is needed before the student should be expected to take the English TAAS.

Activity 5: Interviews with State-Level Associations, Legislators, and TEA Managers

In Austin on July 15 and 16, 1996, staff members from the Texas Education Agency and from Westat interviewed selected stakeholders within and outside the TEA to gather their opinions on possible changes to the exit level test and the implications for accountability. Although special education and LEP assessment were also addressed, this summary focuses on the exit level test only. The interviews were introduced by asking two critical questions: What changes would you like to see in the assessment program? What changes would you oppose or do you feel would not work?

The interview with John Stevens from the Business and Education Coalition covered topics relating to assessment, reporting, and accountability systems. He views the TAAS as a minimum requirement and suggested that additional assessments such as a workforce readiness test be given. In regard to alternatives to the exit test, Mr. Stevens stressed the importance of good instruction over changing the test format. He also thought that the TAAS could be put to better use if the results were used in earlier grades to focus on diagnosis and remediation.

Representative Scott Hochberg and legislative staff members Craig Smith and Jack Elrod expressed openness to creative and thoughtful ideas, but they wanted full disclosure on how students and programs are currently operating. Also considered were testing and reporting options for students unable to take the regular TAAS. The general feeling was that all students should be assessed somehow, and exemptions from testing should be rare.

Joe Neely and Felipe Alanis, deputy commissioners from the Texas Education Agency, were briefed on the issues surrounding alternative assessment system and had similar reactions to the difficulty and importance of developing alternatives to the exit level test.

David Stamman from the Texas Association of School Boards suggested using both objective and subjective criteria when deciding whether or not to award diplomas to students who repeatedly fail the TAAS with a near passing grade. His idea was that a panel of three persons who are from inside and outside the school system could examine a student's materials or portfolio and decide based on a standard set of competencies if a diploma should be given.

Criss Cloudt, Associate Commissioner of Policy Planning and Research at TEA, and Cherry Kugle, Director of Performance Reporting, focused on the possible implications of changes in the TAAS for accountability system. Due to the time required to access the data and to develop and implement the system if modifications require complex combinations of multiple ratings, change could be very problematic. In their interview, the two reviewed several reports from their offices that provided a useful overview of the current accountability system.

Activity 6: Review of Practices in the Field

Westat conducted a literature search and interviews with state assessment directors or other state personnel in 22 states to gain insights into current thinking and practices both in the states and the field at large with regard to exit level testing and the use of alternative assessment system. We were interested in investigating both what psychometricians and policy analysts had to say about issues in developing and implementing alternative assessment system as well as the status of exit level testing practices state-by-state. A list of the literature consulted is attached. Three central issues emerged:

- Technical Issues: There is concern that the alternative assessment system may not give valid results or results equivalent to the regular tests.

- Instructional Issues: Lack of professional development for teachers and other professional staff is another critical issue. The new assessments require a different approach to education than do the traditional ones.

- Legal Issues: Issues of due process, due notice, equity, and test validity pervade all assessments. Alternative testing procedures increase these concerns.

Westat's distillation of telephone discussions with directors of various state assessment programs indicates that while the practice of exit level testing is growing, the use of alternative approaches is limited.

- The number of states currently using, developing, or seriously considering implementation of a statewide graduation test of some type is growing. Currently, 16 other states have some form of such a test and the number seems likely to increase to more than 20 within the next 2 or 3 years.

- Very few states are considering "alternative" exams or related mechanisms to their graduation tests. With the exception of New Jersey and, to some extent Hawaii, Ohio, and New Mexico, most "alternative" procedures consist primarily of accommodations or generally minor administrative modifications of the basic tests (e.g., extended time limits, providing directions in a primary language other than English, permitting the use of word processors).

- Several states with graduation tests either offer or are considering, a multi-stage or "tiered" diploma.

- Logistical (time, cost, and local burden), legal, and psychometric (equating and validity, primarily) issues surrounding "alternative" procedures are so significant that few states are ready to adopt them.

States	Exit exam required for high school Diploma Grade/Subject	Contact
Alabama	11/R, M, LA	Dr. Gloria Turner, Coord. Student Assessment - 334-242-8038
Connecticut	10/M, LA, Sc	Steve Martin, Testing Coordinator - 810-566-2201
Florida	10/R, W, M	Dr. Thomas Fisher, Admin. Assessment/Virginia Sasser, Program Director in Assessment - 904-488-8198
Georgia	11/M, E, Sc, SS, Writing	Larry Parker, Director of Testing & Evaluation Unit - 404-656-2668
Hawaii	10/16 Competencies	Marion Chrislip, Testing Coordinator - 808-733-9003
Louisiana	10/M, E, Composition	Alton Ford, Specialist in Testing - 504-342-3748
Maryland	9/R, M, W,	Fran Albert, Coordinator in Assessment - 410-767-0081
Mississippi	11/R, M, E, Composition	Dr. Gloria Beal, Operations Manager - 601-359-3052
Nevada	11/R, M ,W	Kathy St. Clair, Consultant to the Dept. of Education - 702-687-9189
New Jersey	11/R, M, W	Dr. Gerald deMauro, Director of Testing - 609-984-6311
New Mexico	10/R, LA, M, Sc, SS, Composition	Dr. Carroll Bud Hall, Director of Testing - 505-827-6524
North Carolina	8/R, M	Dr. Chris Averett, Director of Accountability Services - 919-715-1207
Ohio	9/R, M, W, SS	Roger Trent, Director of Testing - 614-466-3224
South Carolina	10/R	Dr. Vana Dabney, Education Associate - 803-734-8298
Tennessee	9/M, LA/ACT or SAT	Benjamin Brown, Director of Student Assessment - 615-532-4770
Virginia	9/LA, R, W, M, Sc, SS	Dr. Doris Redfield, Division Chief of Assessment & Reporting - 804-225-2102

Key for Subjects:

R - Reading
M - Mathematics
LA - Language Arts
Sc - Science
W - Writing
E - English
SS - Social Studies
ACT - American College Testing
SAT - Scholastic Assessment Tests

Activity 7: National and State Advisory Panel Meeting

A meeting was held in Austin, Texas, on August 22, 1996, to present Westat's initial options, as well as other options suggested by Texas stakeholders and the TEA, for changes to the student assessment and accountability systems related to exit level tests.

The meeting was attended by national and state experts on exit level tests, the TEA assessment team, and TEA and Westat staff members. The experts serving as the national advisory panel members were Dr. S.E. Phillips, Attorney and Professor at Michigan State University; Dr. Roger Trent, Director of Assessment, The Ohio Department of Education; Dr. Floraline I. Stevens, Consultant; and Dr. John Keene, Consultant.

State advisory panelists were Ms. Caroyl Green, San Antonio ISD; Dr. Joseph Johnson, University of Texas at Austin; Dr. Maria Montecel, Intercultural Development Research Association; Ms. Jo Polk, Region X ESC; Mr. J. Joseph Stewart, Woodrow Wilson Fellow in Public Policy (on assignment to the NAACP); Dr. Mike Strozeski, Planning Research and Development, Garland ISD; and Dr. Bettye Thompson, Bigby Havis & Associates.

Mike Beck of Westat opened the meeting with an overview of the options to be considered and an introduction of panelists, which was followed by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each option. Panelists were asked to respond to Westat shortly after the meeting with other considerations or recommendations not suggested at the meeting.

Four categories of options were to be considered at the meeting. The first category was "Changing the Way Exit Level Students May Demonstrate the Knowledge and Skills Evaluated by Assessment Instrument." In this category, seven options were initially considered, four were dismissed, and three were recommended for further study. After reviewing information, participants concluded that in order to develop alternative methods of assessments, it is important to consider options for changes in other parts of the student assessment and accountability systems that may enable students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills evaluated by the exit level tests.

The second category, "Changes in the Way the Tests Are Administered or in the Format of the Tests," contained ten options. The recommendations focused on the need to provide earlier and more instructionally focused remedial attention to students who are likely not to graduate from high school because of inadequate achievement. Discussion of "Changes in the Criteria for Inclusion in the Student Assessment System" followed, with three options related to exit level students of limited English proficiency. None of these options was recommended for further consideration. The fourth category, "Changes in the Way TAAS and End-of-Course Test Results Are Reported," included discussion of options related to the individual item analysis report as well as issues related to the reporting of students' test scores. Discussion of "Changing the Way the TAAS and End-of-Course Tests Are Used in the Accountability System" focused on using the newly created cumulative exit level passing rate for schools and districts as a base indicator in the accountability system. The final category, "Changes in Other Areas of the Educational System," had four options to consider, including a two-tier high school diploma system and a professional development system to assist districts and campuses with the selection and use of instructional materials in remediation programs.

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a nonsegregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 AS AMENDED BY THE EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 1972; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; EQUAL PAY ACT OF 1964; TITLE IX, EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED; IMMIGRATION REFORM AND CONTROL ACT OF 1986; AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT OF 1990; AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1991.

The Texas Education Agency shall comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all federal and state laws, rules, and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any educational programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, disability, age, or veteran status (except where age, sex, or disability constitutes a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency is an Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer.

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